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ABSTRACT

Retrospective accounts of 42 married couples were used to construct a developmental model of courtship. A basic three-stage pattern was found to characterize the majority of relationships from initial acquaintance to marriage: Casual Dating, Serious Dating and Engagement. Changes in the relationships were measured through the use of a standardized questionnaire. Factor analysis of the data yielded two primary orthogonal factors: Love and Conflict-Negativity. Ambivalence and Maintenance Behavior were two additional clusters related to the major factors. Love and Conflict-Negativity reflect the reward and cost processes in relationship functioning. The four dimensions were found to significantly change across courtship and post-marital stages. The developmental model was used to explore differences in courtship style and relationship stability between two types of couples. Relationships which were characterized by a rapid development of intimacy in courtship were found to be somewhat less stable during engagement and marriage than those in which intimacy developed more gradually over time. (Author/BN)

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STAGES OF COURTSHIP: THE DEVELOPMENT OF PREMARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

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The research I will be discussing today was designed to generate a developmental model of premarital relationships. Specifically, three studies sought to examine and characterize the process whereby a man and a woman proceed from the level of initial acquaintance to the establishment of a long-term, formalized mutual commitment. While courtship and romantic love have intrigued poets and writers for centuries, social scientists have only recently turned to the dynamics of ongoing heterosexual relationships as a viable and, indeed, critical subject of scientific study. The emergence of this topic as an important area for psychological research is largely reflected in the theme of this convention--women and men. Still, we are a long way from understanding the way in which women and men form intimate relationships over time or how acquaintance and attraction develop into love and commitment. To paraphrase Zick Rubin, scientists still know far more about how material objects attract than they do about the passions and preferences of human beings.

Because no conceptual model of premarital relationship development existed in the social psychological literature--despite a sizeable body of work on the general topic of heterosexual relationships and attraction--the studies were largely descriptive and exploratory in nature. The general approach was retrospective and mainly phenomenological. The goal was to conceptualize the process of relationship growth from acquaintance through marriage on the basis of how currently married couples reconstructed and reported the development of their own relationships. This approach was chosen for two reasons. First, married couples were viewed as an identifiable population of ongoing relationships with the common past experience of a courtship that culminated

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in a formalized long-term commitment. Second, since the course of heterosexual relationship growth was, for the most part, uncharted in the literature, retrospective self-reports by actual couples seemed an appropriate first step toward generating an empirical developmental model.

The first step toward establishing a developmental model of premarital relationships lies in determining whether consensually perceived stages of courtship can be defined. If discrete developmental stages exist, such stages should be recognized and reported by most couples, thereby constituting a normative pattern. If, on the other hand, each couple's courtship is idiosyncratic, normative characterization would be precluded and a general developmental model would have no value.

A preliminary investigation of this question was conducted in a pilot study with 16 young married couples. Husbands and wives, separately, were asked to divide a timeline reflecting the period from their initial acquaintance to their marriage into what they considered to be "important stages, periods, or perhaps turning points" in the development of their own relationships. Brief written sketches were provided by subjects describing each of the stages they had delineated. Data from this study were subjectively examined in order to detect possible developmental patterns common to most courtships. A consensus emerged from the stage descriptions indicating that a combination of some or all of eight stages could describe the developmental pattern of all the relationships. These eight stages (not necessarily in order) included: Friends, Casual Dating, Serious Dating, Engaged-not Living Together, Living Together-but not Engaged, Living Together and Engaged, Break-up, and Physical Separation (not due to breaking up).

The pilot study, then, suggested general commonalities among various couples' report of their progress toward commitment. A second study was conducted to serve as a kind of cross-validation of the stages as consensually recognized periods in courtship development. Beyond this basic purpose, the Second study sought to measure the frequency of occurrence of the various stages and their sequence, length and subjective experience in the context of total courtship time.

Twenty married couples (married an average of 19.5 months) participated in the second study. The 40 subjects completed a one-hour instrument which included, in part, a survey of whether or not each of the 8 stages had occurred in their respective courtships. Subjects demarcated the sequence and length of each stage in their courtships on a "relationship timeline" and provided written, open-ended descriptions of their subjective experiences during each stage.

The results indicated that a basic pattern could, in fact, be discerned across couples consisting of three major stages: Casual Dating, Serious Dating, and Engagement. Each of these stages, separately, was recognized by a majority of subjects as compromising part of their own courtship experience. No significant sex differences in reporting were found. For the majority of couples sampled, all three stages were reported and, in combination, the three accounted for about 83% of the total courtship period. The qualitative nature of the data suggested that these stages represented not only temporally distinct periods, in courtship, but also psychologically and socially different levels of interpersonal functioning arrayed on a continuum of increasing intimacy.

The Casual Dating stage was described by these couples as an initial, tentative and largely superifical level of interaction. Generally, it is typified by feelings of attraction toward the partner (based on physical attributes and perceived personality traits), sexual exploration, and ambivalence about the continuance of the relationship. Relative to later stages, reports of love, conflict, third party influence and the couples' sense of being a unit in the Casual Dating stage are infrequent.

As couples' relationships escalate from Casual to Serious Dating, a number of important changes take place. The relationship during Serious Dating is characterized by increasing reports of love feelings, a sense of belonging with the partner, and public recognition of the pair as comprising a definite unit. In addition, the transition to Serious Dating is marked by an increase in conflict and negative affect between the pair. In this stage, couples also recognize the seriousness and depth of their feelings toward one another, are sexually intimate, begin to plan their future together, and to discuss

the possibility of marriage. Attraction to the partner now derives from need satisfaction, in addition to the attractions of the previous stage.

The shift from Serious Dating to Engagement is somewhat less pronounced than from Casual to Serious Dating. The most significant event and clearest definition of this stage is the couple's formalization of their commitment in a public decision to marry. Reported feelings during Engagement span the range from love, belonging, extreme happiness and excitement, to ambivalence, conflict, negativity and anxiety, suggesting that this stage may be a rather turbulent and traumatic period in courtship.

The results of the second study, then, provided a common pattern of stages from which a developmental model could be constructed. The utility of such a model does not rest entirely, however, with its applicability to a majority of relationships. In addition, the criterion of utility lies with how well the model describes the process of relationship change over time. To this end, the model must first specify the important dimensions of relationship growth--i.e., what aspects of the relationship characterize the developmental process. Then, having specified the relevant variables, the model must then describe the nature of the changes in these dimensions over time. In this context, the concept of developmental "stages" represents time sampling points at which to observe change patterns.

The third study, then, sought to translate the qualitative descriptions of the previous studies into quantifiable variables of relationship functioning. This was accomplished through the use of standardized questionnaires and the development of factor scales. Members of 22 married couples jointly identified the location of the three major stages in their relationship's histories. Then, the 44 subjects independently answered a set of 30 scaled questions dealing with behavior, attitudes, and feelings toward the partner and toward the relationship during each of the three premarital stages plus a fourth stage--the first 6 months of marriage.

A Principal Components factor analysis was performed separately on the questionnaire responses for each of the four stages. The

analysis yielded two primary orthogonal factors across the stages. Factor I was a general Love dimension defined by feelings of belonging, closeness, attachment, and the subjective experience of love. Factor II is a Conflict/Negativity dimension defined most clearly by the presence and communication of behavioral conflict and the experience and expression of negative affect toward the partner. It is important to underscore that these dimensions emerged as orthogonal factors, suggesting that rewards and costs in relationships are independent processes. Thus, conflict and negativity are not necessarily lowered by strengthened feelings of love or vice versa. And, conversely, expressions of conflict or negative affect will not necessarily produce lowered love feelings nor will their suppression keep love strong.

In addition to the principal factors, two other highly intercorrelated clusters of items were extracted to form factor scales. The first reflects a dimension of Ambivalence about the relationship and its continuance; the second cluster was termed "Maintenance" and includes behaviors engaged in by the dyad to reduce costs (e.g., problem solving) and to maximize rewards (e.g., self-disclosure). Interestingly, the relationship of these two clusters to Love and Conflict/Negativity changed across developmental stages, suggesting a rather complex nature of both ambivalence and maintenance behaviors in courtship growth. Possible causes or roots of ambivalence may be infered from the pattern of factor loadings. In relatively early stages of relationship growth, ambivalence apparently occurs in response to conflict and negativity in the relationship. After marriage, however, ambivalence seems to arise not as a consequence of conflict but rather as a result of waning feelings of love. Maintenance behaviors also change their meaning with respect to the primary factor dimensions. In early stages, maintenance behaviors seem designed to maximize or increase rewards (i.e., the presence of Love feelings); in later stages, maintenance behaviors are invoked to resolve conflict and thereby minimize costs.

By utilizing the designated four stages as time sampling points, the four factor dimensions were found to exhibit linear developmental trends. Love, Conflict/Negativity and Maintenance behaviors all

showed significant increasing trends over time as the relationship moved toward marriage. Thus, as courtship progressed, couples felt more in love, but also engaged in more conflict, experienced more negative affect and spent more time discussing their feelings and working out problems in their relationship. The Ambivalence scores on the scale showed a decreasing linear trend over time, consistent with commitment and dissonance reduction models.

Finally, the developmental approach was used to explore differences in courtship style. Couples whose courtships were characterized by a relatively rapid development of intimacy were found to be somewhat less stable (as reflected by less love and greater ambivalence) during engagement and post marital stages than were those for whom intimacy developed more gradually over time.